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A Month Of Sundays: COVID-19 As Told By Webcams

by Mike Downing

"There is a tension that now bubbles between two or more humans within a given space. It's a different world; one which has seen Neighbourhood Watch repurposed into lockdown espionage."



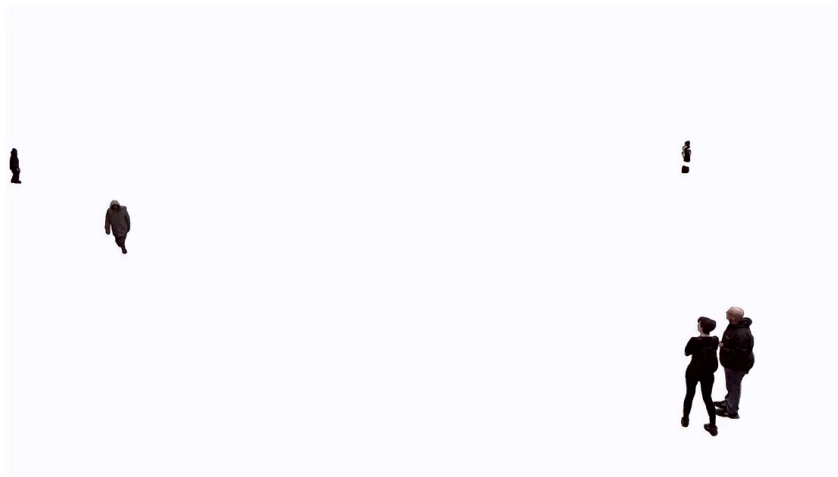
The death of public squares @ Jubilee Square, Leicester, March 24 (Credit: Mike Downing)

'A Month of Sundays' is an ongoing project made in direct response to the global Covid-19 Pandemic, beginning on the first formal day of imposed 'lockdown' in the UK on March the 23rd, 2020.

The images are sourced from publicly accessible webcams spanning the globe; from those designed to promote sites of historical and cultural importance, to those which monitor dense city centres for security, traffic flow or weather conditions. At first, the focus of the images was on the unnatural stillness and absence of human habitation and movement, an approach which mimicked mass media imagery - the empty streets of previously bustling cities and sites. However, it became apparent that the points of real interest within each scene were actually the people that did remain.

Sanitation workers, police enforcement, medical staff and the general public exercising could be seen to varying numbers. In some territories more clearly enforced rules were in place, in others civilian numbers would drop over a matter of days as the severity of the situation increased.

As the webcams of many Asian countries began to show signs of repopulation, European locations emptied. The uncanny appearance of a deserted St Peter's Square, or 5th Avenue has all the visual allure of post apocalyptic cinema, but for me, the sight of any human activity became the draw and lead to an obsessive daily trawl of the webcams of the world.



Times Square, New York, March 23 (Credit: Mike Downing)

In these environments, where it would once have been difficult to pick out an individual in a sea of human activity, their presence in the emptiness can now be beacon-like.

Parallel to this is the fact that, increasingly, there is a tension that now bubbles beneath the intersection of two or more humans within a given space. This leads to a very different lens from which to view the world, one that is mirrored in the growing sense of civilian self policing, the retooling of Neighbourhood Watch as 'lockdown' espionage, and quick judgement of the actions of others.

To some extent, in producing this work, I too have become a sort of virtual 'curtain twitcher'. It becomes all too easy to wonder 'what are you doing? why aren't you at home?,' from afar. The removal of landmarks also highlights that a virus is largely indifferent to geography, grandeur, history and wealth, an iconic location is subject to the same rules as the most mundane - and the nature of the webcam means that the Colosseum of Rome is viewed through the same grainy digital window as small town Canada. This vacuum of visual information also provides a guessing game of dimensions and architecture as people navigate an invisible terrain, like a snow-blanketed L.S. Lowry.



By using webcams as a source material, the imagery is intrinsically linked to the aesthetics of power, authority and surveillance. The limited fidelity, elevated viewpoint and sometimes roving view lend a sense of voyeurism. When looking at these stripped back scenes of road crossings in Chicago or Moscow in motion, one is struck by the act of observing real people, unaware of their observation from afar. Each person pictured is living through a shared global experience while going about their governmentally mandated activities.

Conversely, there is a striking similarity to the act of being part of a simulation or programmed experience, each person perhaps a scripted AI construct akin to the 'civilians' of a Grand Theft Auto game. Indeed, in considering and representing this unique and somewhat synchronous global event, there is a balance to be struck between the narrative of the individual,

many of whom will be tragically affected by the spread of the virus and that of the 'bigger picture'; people as statistics and data.

This project, drawn from literal 'viral video' streams is intended to serve as an alternative document to what we are persistently told are challenging, uncertain, unprecedented times.

Been making art during quarantine? Want to be part of our COVID-19 art series? Get in touch.

Mike is a photographic artist, and University Lecturer currently working, residing and teaching in Lincoln, a cathedral city in the East Midlands of England. [Learn more](#)

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